

# **Hazardous Engagement: God Makes a Friend**

Patricia A. Williams



**Quaker Universalist Fellowship**

**The Quaker Universalist Fellowship** is an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our conversation with all who search sincerely. Our mission includes publishing and providing speakers and opportunities for fellowship at regional and national Quaker gatherings.

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## Editor's Introduction

Early in 2005 Patricia Williams became the editor of *Universalist Friends*, and readers of the journal will have learned something of her life story in issue Number 42. In her introductory essay there she describes herself as an editor, a scholar, an academic, and a Quaker by conviction. Raised in the Episcopal church, Patricia holds a PhD in philosophy and has taught at universities in Australia, Canada, and the United States. For some years she specialized in the philosophy of science then moved into the field of theology. The author of several books, she writes for both the academic world and for general readers. She was recently elected a Fellow of the Westar Institute, which is best known for its work on the Jesus Seminar.

In her own introduction to this pamphlet, Patricia tells how it came into being and how she excerpted it from a book that still awaits publication. To her readers she says: If you want to contact me, please do. My e-mail address is <theologyauthor@aol.com>. For information on my other books, please see my web site at <www.theologyauthor.com>.

Rhoda R. Gilman



## **Hazardous Engagement: God Makes a Friend**

### Introduction

To understand this pamphlet, it is necessary to know how it came to exist. It began with a series of spiritual experiences that occurred over a period of seven years, from early 1993 through 1999. During those years, I wrote a daily spiritual journal and also retained my weekly planners. Thus, when I decided to write a spiritual autobiography of those years, I had the raw materials available. I wrote the autobiography during 2001 and 2002, framing it as a series of monthly letters to the spiritual presence I refer to as Jesus or Christ or God or the Holy Spirit or any of several other metaphors typical of Christian references to the deity — Comforter, Advocate, Light, Savior, Teacher.

While the autobiography was seeking a publisher and for reasons related to my professional philosophical work on science and religion, I read deeply in Quaker theology and history — mostly the initial, 17th-century Quakers, especially works of the founder, George Fox, and the systematic theologian, Robert Barclay. At last I decided to re-orient my own book slightly, and in re-reading the manuscript I discovered to my astonishment that the spiritual presence who had been my teacher during those seven years had taught me lessons that were in close accord with the theology of the first Quakers! Thus, the book can be read both as a spiritual autobiography and as an experiential affirmation of early Quakerism.

This pamphlet offers a taste of that 60,000-word book in 10,000 words. I have retained most of the first year and the

last, then offered central letters from the intervening years. Most of my social and work life is deleted, leaving a spiritual core that tells of my journey from Episcopalianism to the modern liberal Religious Society of Friends. Please do not mistake the narrator for an omniscient voice. I am the narrator, and I have tried to capture what I experienced at the time and what I thought about it then, right or wrong.

## Quaker Theology

The core Quaker doctrine as seen through Fox and Barclay is that every person has a measure of the Divine within. These early Quakers believed God to be omnipresent, immanent in all things, but their emphasis was on persons. Each and every one has a measure of divine Light, whether they are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, pantheist or atheist, whether they are male or female, black or white, bond or free, heterosexual or homosexual. This divine Light has many roles, but principally it shows people their sins, saves them from sin and death, and instructs them. The Light is divine; it is not conscience, although it may reprove and enlighten conscience.

This divine, inner Light shows us our sins in order to purify us from them. Being shown one's sins can be unpleasant, of course. The early Quakers speak of groaning, crying, suffering, and repenting. They did, indeed, quake before God. Fox advises them not to dwell on their sins, but to look above the sins to their Savior. Nevertheless, logic says that in order to cease sinning we must see our sins so we can confess them, repent, and amend our lives.

The early Quakers thought moral perfection to be possible now, in this life. Fox reproves Protestants for preaching that we are always sinful and Roman Catholics for their doctrine of purgatory. God, he says, can purge us of sin here and need not wait for an afterlife. Although perfection requires our desire for it and our efforts, in the end it is a gift of God who brings us

to the perfection Adam and Eve were in before they fell and lost the image of God in which they were created. We are transformed, then, from sinful people who disobey God and tarnish the divine image in us into people who are morally upright, people filled with love and compassion for all.

The Quaker testimonies capture this sense of transformation. The central ones are simplicity of life, the equality of all persons, non-violence, and not swearing oaths but telling the truth on all occasions. Quakers emphasize the unity of everyone and everything because they want all to live together in peace, but their hope that harmony can reign springs from the belief that there is one God, one Spirit, one Light, and if the same Light enlightens us, we will live in harmony with it, with one another, and with the rest of creation. This one Spirit is head of the church. The church, then, needs no formal ministers or priests, no bishops, and, certainly, no pope. Fox refers to all these as “hireling priests,” whether Protestant or Catholic. He thinks those who minister, preach, or heal should do so without pay, for they perform these actions by the free grace of God, and what God gives freely should be freely passed on.

Fox recognizes that different people have diverse talents, and that some, himself included, have a calling to preach that others may not share. Still, anyone may have such a calling; it comes from God, who is no respecter of earthly status. The early Quakers worshiped together in silence, listening for God, waiting for the Light. Any person whom God inspired to speak in meeting could speak, whether male or female, rich or poor, educated or illiterate. All should listen respectfully, for this person’s voice is, ideally, the voice of God with a message to God’s gathered people.

Because God is present at meeting, there is no point in doing anything to evoke the Spirit’s presence. The Light is within — no need to remember it or to call it down from the heavens above. Therefore Fox and Barclay see no point in celebrating the lord’s supper (hereafter, eucharist) in

remembrance of Jesus' death, as Saint Paul suggests. Communion either takes place internally, or it does not. The externals, bread and wine, are useless. Barclay and Fox treat baptism similarly. They see no point in it. Either it is an empty ritual, in which case there is no reason to go through the motions, or the Holy Spirit baptizes us, in which case we do not need water sprinkled or body immersed. Indeed, the early Quakers rejected all external rites and rituals. Fox and Barclay consider them pernicious. They are superficial and false teachers that lead people away from their inner Light into darkness.

As did all in Christendom in the 17th century, the early Quakers believed the scriptures to be historical: Adam and Eve were the first couple, Noah and his family survived a worldwide flood, Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery, Joshua invaded the promised land, Jesus said exactly what the gospels report, was born of a virgin, and died to atone for our sins. However, Fox spiritualizes all of it, as does Barclay. Like rites and rituals, historical events are external. For the early Quakers, their meaning is internal. All the scriptural narratives foreshadow what happens in us today, in our inner lives, as we become increasingly aware of God within. We are fallen Adams and Eves. We are slaves who are liberated. We are conquerors of sin who enter the promised land of holiness. We are Jesus' disciples who fall away, then return transformed to suffer for the gospel. We have at-one-ment with the deity because we are united with God inwardly, now, in this life. Although Fox believes the deed of Jesus' crucifixion important, it happened long ago. Fox focuses on what happens now, within each individual, in each person's encounter with the Light.

Because the scriptures serve as signs or foreshadowings or allegories of our inner transformation, Fox considers them secondary, not primary. The Spirit is the source, the fountain, the primary teacher, the One who inspired those who wrote the scriptures and inspires us, today, too. This perspective implies that revelation did not end sometime in the 2nd century, as most Protestants believe. It continues today.

Yet, Fox took the scriptures seriously. He read them often enough to have memorized them, and his sermons are filled with scriptural quotations and allusions. Barclay, too, treated them earnestly. His *Catechism* is a series of statements confirmed by quotations from scripture. The point he seeks to prove is that Quakerism is closer to scripture than Protestantism is. But, then, this was before the rise of biblical criticism and modern science and history. Today, Quakers look to other external evidence also to substantiate their beliefs. But, mostly, like the early Quakers, they turn within.

Another notable feature of Fox's writing, and of early Quakerism generally, is that it is not trinitarian. Fox makes little distinction, if any, between God and Christ (the risen Christ, knowable experientially). He makes little or no distinction between the risen Christ and the historical Jesus. Rather, he focuses on the Spirit that meets and transforms and leads us now, and he offers many metaphors for it — God, Christ, Jesus Christ, Light, Seed, Teacher, second Adam, image of God, and Lamb, among others.

The early Quakers were universalists. They took seriously their basic faith that there is a measure of deity in everyone. Thus, they believe God can save those who do not know the narratives about Jesus or that they have a savior crucified for their sins. God can bring them, too, out of their sins and into perfection, here and now. Like Fox and his Christian contemporaries, people who do not know about Jesus need only follow the inner Light, the measure of God within all people. The inner Teacher will teach them all things necessary to salvation, here and now, and lead them to perfection.

The measure can differ in people, depending on how they respond to the Light they have. Some have little and/or it lies under the filth of their sins. Others have large measure. Some have the Light without measure. The early Quakers thought Jesus the only one with such measureless Light, but some modern Quaker universalists think others, too, may have had it. They often name the Buddha as a candidate.

Finally, but of central importance, Quakerism is an experiential religion. It is not learned from others, second hand, but comes directly from the Spirit, the inner Light. Clarity about this is important. The present evangelical position is that a person must believe in Jesus Christ to be saved. Quakers say we must know Christ, the inner Light, here and now — must meet that Light, must experience its presence within ourselves. I believe that my journey into the Spirit, and concomitantly into Quakerism, can serve as an experiential affirmation of the Quaker theology of direct access to the Spirit. It begins with an extraordinary experience of God that I interpreted at the time in medieval and Catholic terms.

## The Call

30 April 1993

Dear God,

You've made a mistake. I've thought a lot about it, and now I'm going to write about it, to see it in front of me, on paper. I got your message okay. That's not the problem. The problem is, I'm the wrong person. Your message must have been meant for someone else. I admit the time was right — my favorite day of the church year, Maundy Thursday, when the institution of my beloved eucharist is celebrated. And the place was right, too — church immediately after the celebration, the altar stripped, the lights dimmed, holy silence. And the vision. There's no mistaking the vision, a mental vision, of course, not one a camera could capture, but a vision nonetheless. It was a vision of me as a bride, a very classical '50s bride, long dress, white veil, and all.

I didn't like the symbol even then. Marriage is not my thing, not to mention being a classical '50s bride. Yet the use of a bride as symbol is one reason I don't think my own mind made up the message. My mind would have chosen a symbol I

liked. Anyway the message is clear. It's a call to what the medieval mystics know as the unitive life, a life fully united to yours. The medieval writers used the symbol of marriage to talk about it.

Swept up as I was at the time, in that spiritual atmosphere and state of prayer, I said "yes! yes!" joyously. Suddenly the Spirit of altar and eucharist, who has always seemed exterior, seemed interior. Your familiar presence appeared inside me. At the time, I was enormously grateful. However, in the cool light of day, I know something is wrong. I'm not worthy of such a thing. There must have been a mistake. The message was meant for someone else, someone far better than I, a saint somewhere. The heavenly bureaucracy got the address wrong.

Look, I'm hardly even religious. I teach in a secular university. I'm a philosopher of science. I believe in reason and evidence. I defend science against faith, evolution against creationism, and naturalized ethics against the Bible. I don't think the Bible is authoritative. Christianity might be the wrong religion. I've not believed it to be the right religion since I was in eighth grade, when I read up on world religions and decided I would never know what the right one is, if there is a right one. I'm an Episcopalian merely because I decided to stay in the religion of my childhood unless I saw good reason to change. Moreover I'm a skeptic. I'm perfectly willing to admit that God might not exist, that all religious experience might be mere fantasy, including my own. I don't believe half the things the churches teach, any churches, mine included. I've remained an Episcopalian while I've been a Christian, a theist, an agnostic, and an atheist. Yes, an atheist. I was an atheist for four or five years — that's years, not minutes.

Furthermore I drink, I cuss, and I've had a dozen lovers. I've broken most of the Ten Commandments more than once. I admit I've not born false witness. Nor am I covetous. Nor have I murdered anyone, but I've certainly wanted to. I

remember being disappointed when Dave died because his death meant I could no longer kill him. I get angry! I was so angry at one time, I felt killing people was good. I knew my feelings were wrong, but I certainly felt the emotions. My sympathies were with the gunmen who randomly shot people in McDonald's. I knew how they felt.

Dear God, there's been a mistake. People like me are not called to unity with you. We'll never sit among the saints. We can only hope to slip unnoticed some foggy night through a crack in the heavenly portals.

Writing like this and rereading seems helpful. If necessary, I'll try again.

26 May 1993

Dear and Blessed Spirit,

Today is my birthday. Happy birthday to me. Maybe this is a good day to write you.

The Maundy Thursday vision is still worrying me, partly because my skepticism cuts both ways. It's possible, although highly improbable, that there wasn't a mistake. If you have called me, it's an incredible privilege and honor, and I should be responding positively.

I guess the appropriate response is to increase the amount of time I spend in prayer and Bible reading. Neither should be difficult since I rarely do either except in church. A couple years ago I tried doing the daily offices in the *Book of Common Prayer*, but I gave up. They're just too boring. Reading the gospels is boring too. I already know them from hearing them read on Sundays. In response to my experience of your healing my depression in college, I've attended eucharist during the week, too, where they're also read. After so much exposure, I can't read them fresh. I remember what comes next, often word for word.

So I need guidance. I feel I don't know how to pray outside church, without the prayer book. I know there are spiritual directors somewhere, but I don't know how to find one, and anyway I mistrust religious people. They're too pious. They find me too autonomous. They expect obedience to some external authority, beginning with themselves.

Maybe you could be my director? I ask seriously. I don't know where else to turn, and I'm really in need. I'll set aside daily time for prayer and try to listen for you. Even if I've not been called, spending more time in prayer should be okay.

Thinking of prayer reminds me to thank you for your blessings over the years. A couple weeks ago I attended a conference at the church camp up in the mountains. The conference was a bore and I left early, but while I was there I spent time revisiting the two summers I was a camper there when I was fourteen and fifteen. I sat in the outdoor chapel, and memories flooded back. The most poignant was of the first summer when Sharon and I got into rivalry over an older man. I think he was sixteen. One evening I left the other campers and sat in that very chapel, listening to the distant shouts and laughter and singing. There I thought about Sharon and me. She was a wimp with a shrill voice who was poorly coordinated. I knew I could beat her out and win our young man's heart.

You showed me what that would entail: jealous rivalry, meanness, and manipulating him sexually to win. This would not be the only time. There would be more men, more rivalries. I could choose to become this vixen or to step aside and let Sharon win. I stepped aside. I've continued to make that choice. I've chosen not to compete with other women sexually and not to manipulate men. As a result I've been blessed with wonderful friends, male and female. Men have trusted me, and their trust healed some who'd been damaged in their relationships with the vixens of this world. Thank you for the gifts you have poured upon me.

29 June 1993

Dearest Revealer,

Once before, when I was eight or ten, I had an experience similar to the one I had with you yesterday among the mountain laurel. They are worth recording. The earlier experience took place under a huge poplar tree in our front yard one hot day in midsummer. All of a sudden I saw that everything is one, that the diversity we see around us is an illusion. Or maybe it's not an illusion, but only one way of seeing. There's another way of seeing, and from that other perspective, everything's united.

Today's physicists say something similar. In quantum mechanics everything's connected, even things separated by great distances. Electrons "know" what their sister electrons are doing. It's weird. Moreover cosmologists think the four basic laws of physics were once a single law. The laws diverged by something called "symmetry breaking" as the universe cooled. The diversity we observe rests on that broken symmetry. Once, everything was one.

Is everything still one?

Everything was one in the rain and fog among the laurel blooms. It was as if the rain and the blossoms were all part of a single system rather than separate entities. The fog seemed to hold it all together, like the ether that was (falsely) said to pervade all space or Newton's absolute space, which turned out not to be absolute. Yet not like those. Those were intellectual constructs built to solve scientific puzzles. Mine was an experience. It was more like a perception than an idea, although, again, a camera would not have detected what I saw. Hard to describe.

I apologize for being so reluctant to go yesterday. There was such a storm! Lightning walks this mountain, and when it does, I don't. The whole incident was such an odd adventure. You were right there, urging me to go. I understood you had something to show me. You took my hand, encouraging me to rush out just as I was, right into the storm.

I stayed in my safe little mountain cabin until I had put on my rain suit and hiking boots. By then the storm had abated. You were so impatient while I dressed! Then you led me across the lawn, into the woods, and half way up the peak into the grove of mountain laurels. Standing there looking south through the grove into the wind and rain, I experienced everything as one. It was beautiful. Is reality truly like this, or is this just one way of perceiving? And why among mountain laurel blooming in a storm? Wouldn't a quietly blossoming day have done as well?

It was so lovely. Something about the quality of light through fog is fantastic, even without accompanying visions. Thank you.

I wonder why you thought it important.

11 August 1993

Dear and Blessed Spirit,

Incredible! I saw you on the lawn. I couldn't wait to write.

It was hot, one of those serene southern evenings. I was out for a walk after being in my cabin all day writing, just looking at the trees and flowers and sunlight, beer in hand, hangin' out in the shade in the cool of the day. Suddenly I sensed your presence behind me. Even before I turned around I was sure you were there, and as I turned I knew you were the person whom I meet at eucharist.

You were standing with that little dogwood beneath the soaring poplar. I could see you. You were standing in the dogwood tree, which is about a man's height. Its branches extend about the girth of a man. You and the tree were coextensive.

My mind rushed ahead of me trying to figure out how you were present. Perhaps the tree had changed and was now you; perhaps the tree and you were both present at the same time in the same place; perhaps you were present in my mind and projected onto the tree; perhaps you weren't present at all, and

all was my imagination or recollection. With humor I realized my racing mind had gone through the historical eucharistic definitions. We have divided your church and killed one another over things beyond our comprehension. Yet I see now that the people who fought one another were aware of your presence at eucharist and, like me, wanted to know how.

Like them, I couldn't merely stand and worship. I walked around the tree where possible, trying to see better. Finally I approached. I heard "Don't touch," but you know my curiosity. I reached out my hand, which went through the space you appeared to occupy and touched a leaf. I withdrew. A breeze stirred the leaves. You were gone.

It was a magic moment.

Although interesting, how you were present was not the point even for curious me. If I wanted to work that out, I'd need to discard the false notions of Aristotelian physics on which the eucharistic definitions and battles rested. In modern physics, matter is a form of energy and is unlike the material objects we perceive daily. Mostly it's empty space — or a frothy vacuum. It could be considered spiritual, it's so spirit-like. Assuming you're present at eucharist, Luther's concept of consubstantiation fits better with modern physics than the Catholic notion of transubstantiation, which would demand a change of atomic structure if taken literally, and then the wine would really change to blood!

Interesting but not the point. The point was that I knew you from my experiences at eucharist. I immediately saw that I've known you at eucharist as a distinct personality, not merely some vague, mystical "presence" such as Wordsworth evokes so often. I've known you almost all my life, but I'd not been conscious that I knew. Now I know. I think I'll dub the tree the "theophany tree" after the term for the manifestation of a god, for my new realization is the equivalent of a revelation. Realizing I've known you so long makes me feel grateful and intimately close to you. Hi, from this side of knowledge.

29 September 1993

Dear and Blessed Comforter,

My prayer life is suddenly filled with imagery, and I want to write it down. I laughed to get images from *Star Trek the Next Generation* whose episodes I have taped and watch over and over, always with delight. There I was on the deck of the Enterprise with Captain Picard, Data, and the rest of the crew. What fun! Clearly the images are symbols and the plots allegorical. While praying I exercise Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief," receiving all uncritically. I can analyze later.

For a while now, almost every time I pray I return to the same story line. I'm climbing Mt. Sinai. As in the biblical narrative, God is at the top of the mountain, hidden in clouds and accompanied by thunder and lightening. My intention is to climb up to God. The story begins at the bottom of the mountain in grassy fields and warm sunlight. I'm dressed sturdily as if for a climb, wearing stout hiking boots. My arms are laden with carefully prepared gifts. I intend to take them to God. I expect a few days' climb and am confident of my abilities. The trip doesn't look difficult.

It starts well. The ascent is moderate and the weather good. Later the incline becomes steeper and the way rocky. The weather turns colder and clouds sweep in driven by strong winds. I begin to have doubts. Storm after storm breaks over the mountain. I fall over rocks that have become slippery with rain. My clothes are torn. I lose my grip on the beautiful gifts that one by one tumble down the mountain, sodden and mangled. I begin to think I'm a fool to go on. Finally I collapse on a rock behind a huge boulder and finger my torn boots, shivering and sobbing, bewildered by the fog and wondering what to do. I've lost track of how many days I've been stumbling up the mountain, and I'm unutterably weary, bruised, and ragged.

Then the storms dissipate. The fog lifts. The boulder is blocking my view of the mountain's top, but I feel too disheartened and exhausted to rise and walk around it. At last my curiosity gets the better of my exhaustion, and I work my way slowly forward. Beyond the boulder is a grassy promontory. As my feet sink into the spongy vegetation, the sun breaks through. I'm so grateful.

In the distance, seemingly as far and as high as when I started, is the top of Mt. Sinai. At the edge of the promontory, between me and the top of the mountain, is a wide, almost vertical chasm, plunging hundreds of feet. As I stand there in complete despair, I become aware that God is watching me. I stand before God in total humility: ragged, dirty, hungry, and bruised. All my gorgeous gifts are gone. I've nothing to bring. Instead I need God's gifts.

Is this a foretaste of the journey I may have been called to take? If so it doesn't look very propitious.

31 December 1993

Dear and Blessed Savior,

I think you've resolved my dilemma.

In prayer I've been carried back to the promontory where I was exposed to the top of Mt. Sinai and God's full view. The chasm's still there and the top of the mountain still far away. I felt the same hopelessness I experienced on the first visit, the same sense of humility before God, and my own aching neediness. I longed to cross the chasm and climb upward even in the face of the apparent impossibility of doing so. I'm not certain what happened next. It appeared that the sunlight struck the mists at such an angle that a rainbow arched from the edge of the promontory to the top of the mountain. But the rainbow was you, forming a secure bridge from the promontory to the seat of God. With your help I could easily cross the chasm and ascend the mountain.

Moreover when God first saw me on the promontory, my humility and neediness were exposed, but my unworthiness was nowhere in evidence. Maybe my unworthiness is not as conspicuous as I thought. Furthermore with you as bridge, my unworthiness felt less important. I need not face God alone, for you'll be with me. Theology says you are human, so you know about our unworthiness, and somehow our unworthiness doesn't matter.

I think it's I who have made the journey up Mt. Sinai so difficult and the chasm so deep. This needs healing. Please help me.

Happy New Year. Maybe the next year will be easier.

## The Interim Years

31 August 1994

Dear and Blessed Comforter,

In prayer I saw an unusual pyramid, so afterward I looked it up. It's a ziggurat, a pyramid with its sides stepped so people can climb up. At first in the prayer the perspective was from the bottom looking up. High, and so far away as to be almost out of sight, I saw myself. I've climbed these steps, sometimes on my hands and knees, soaked in my own blood. I was near the top of the steps. On top of the steps towered a spire, slender, highly polished, and perfectly smooth. I saw it and exclaimed, "I can't climb that. No human being can!" Then I knew I must be carried to the top of the spire if I'm to go there, for I cannot get there through any effort of my own.

So I assented to being carried passively, beyond my will, beyond my control, and so I was. At first I struggled to remain passive, and then suddenly it was effortless, wonderful. I felt like a song being sung.

I was blind. Asked if I wished to see, I replied truthfully that I wished to see only if seeing would help me love you

more; if it would help more to be blind, then I preferred to remain sightless. Immediately I was in a startlingly strong light, too strong to bear, and I was very high up, clinging to the spire of the ziggurat.

“What do you want?” I was asked. I thought, “To know you better, to love you more.” Quickly I saw that this is insufficient for me. Meditation and mysticism are not enough. “I want to be able to enact your love in the world,” I replied, and heard echo through me, “You want it all.” Yes, I want it all.

Then you — soul of the eucharist — were with me, through me, throughout me. I felt like worshiping on my knees in adoration, but how can I get on my knees to you while you are within me? I said, “You are here,” but understood that neither “here” nor “now” has any meaning for you. Here and now are human perceptions and expressions. The laws of the universe are much simpler.

Infused prayer suffused me. It was different from other infused prayers, for it seemed not to come from outside me, but from inside me, spoken within me, not by me, but from me. Extraordinary! Then I was consumed until there was almost no “I,” then fed by you, on you. These two experiences, being consumed and being fed, became simultaneous until I was filled to abundance and beyond. This is unity past imagination. This is love like none I’ve known before. Ah, my beautiful, dear, and blessed Comforter, I thank you with all my heart.

30 November 1995

Beloved,

Poverty, chastity, obedience. I’ve been a nun without knowing it. What a shock! I realized it a couple weeks ago while thinking about issues associated with the Spiritual Direction Institute, and I still haven’t recovered. I do remember that I explored entering a convent in my twenties, and when the lead nun explained what could be accomplished in the

religious life, my immediate response was, “That can be done on the outside.” But I didn’t see myself as doing it, living it then, just as I was, with a beer in one hand and the other holding a lover’s hand.

Obedience came first. I chose it at age six when my parents joined the Episcopal Church, where I saw eucharist enacted and heard the summary of the law as love to God and neighbor. I desperately needed a role model because I didn’t want to grow up to be like my mother. The liturgy provided a role model. Love of God and neighbor wasn’t hypocrisy there, for it was acted out, words and deeds fitted to each other. I fell in love. I wanted to become what that liturgical drama represented.

It represented equality. In the eucharistic celebration God gave to everyone equally — the round pressed wafer, a sip from the cup. At that altar rail everyone knelt, everyone received the same as everyone else, everyone was identical; no one was better than anyone else was. Indeed, if anything, all were equally unworthy. That altar made Episcopal snobbery seem disrespectful.

The eucharistic liturgy represented what I came to call “giveness,” not knowing I’d invented a word. It characterized Paul’s “free gift.” God gave freely. One didn’t need to bring gifts or even to ask; one needed only to be there, to hold out one’s hands, to be willing to receive. Eucharist was free, grace was free. I saw it enacted so I knew it was true. In that light my mother’s emphasis on social reciprocity seemed perverse.

I saw Love enacted. Love gave freely and without discrimination to everyone, worthy or unworthy. Here was God sending rain on the just and unjust. It made racism wrong, at least in that context.

Apparently when I was six I decided who I wanted to be. I wanted to be God. Not the great God up in the sky, the All Holy and unreachable God to whom one prayed on bended knee, but the humble God who gives, who gives divine

substance to everyone who extends a hand. I'm conscious of meeting that God only now, but I've known about (and perhaps subconsciously known) that God for many years. With such a role model, how rich my life has been!

Chastity is not celibacy. In Medieval or Renaissance times, one could speak of a wife and mother as chaste. Chastity in this context meant two things: faithful to her husband and not exploiting her own sexuality, especially for personal gain, not flashing her sex appeal around. Today we might think of such a person as demure. I've not been celibate, but I've been chaste. It's strange to think of myself that way, but I can see it's true. That evening when I had just turned fourteen as I sat in the chapel thinking about Sharon and giving up my side of the contest for our young man, I chose chastity. Moreover I'm naturally monogamous: when attached to one man I lose sexual interest in others. What gifts!

Poverty. When I was twenty-three I chose to live in the poorest section of Melbourne, Australia, and about eighteen months later I gave almost all my belongings to the poor. From then until I moved to the mountain, I owned almost nothing. Now I own more — a house and land and the requisite tools like a chain saw, books, and computer. My mountain cabin is 16 by 24 feet with half an upstairs. It has never been connected to the electric grid. Water is scarce. In warm weather, I shower outdoors, in water heated by the sun and driven by gravity. This is hardly real poverty, but to be a hewer of wood and drawer of water in late 20th-century America is certainly symbolic poverty. I live in symbolic solidarity with the poor and with women, who in many materially poor cultures gather the wood and carry the water. I also tend to dress down, and my sympathies are with victims rather than oppressors, perhaps because I was a victim myself as a child. Poverty has also been a gift. On the whole I have not chased after baubles.

I also see for the first time that I've suffered for my choice — been discriminated against at church and on the job. I didn't

fit in. I had values people didn't understand or didn't like. I must have committed myself wholeheartedly to my choice, though, for even in my years as an atheist I didn't change. I saw that "all things are possible" right along with Raskolnikov, but I couldn't give up my values, and I realized why: they represented most fundamentally who I am.

Looking back I would say that, although an atheist, I was unwilling to give up my life as a nun. I loved God too much, a God whom I thought non-existent at the time. How crazy it all is! How remarkable.

31 March 1996

In the middle of the month I went to Quaker meeting on Sunday morning at 11:00, my first ever. I've always admired the Quakers for their moral leadership. They always seem ahead of the rest of us. When I was an Episcopalian I could never attend because the times clashed, but Saturday night mass has freed my Sunday mornings. And now it's Lent, a good time to take on an extra spiritual discipline. I liked the meeting's simplicity and spirituality; the plain, bright room; the people. They're my sort of folks: casual, without vanity and without pretense. I'll go again.

30 April 1996

Dear Christ,

Again I attended Quaker meeting — the 8:30 meeting this time. I felt completely at ease and at home, and for a while I couldn't figure out why, since I'd been there only once and not at that hour with that group of people. Then I saw. I sit in just such silent meditation myself every morning in a house as bright and simple as the meeting room. Being there is like being home. I think I'll try to attend once a month. I felt exposed before God as I had on the promontory, as if naked, and I realized that I have become naked, bereft of church affiliation.

Maybe this is why my private prayer time on Holy Thursday was so rich with revelation. Beforehand I read the last supper passage from Mark. As if for the first time I heard “On the night he was betrayed.” As often as I’ve attended eucharist I must have listened to the phrase several thousand times, but for the first time I saw Jesus, knowing he was to be betrayed, making himself a servant, washing the disciples’ feet, feeding them. Jesus lived his life symbolically to show us who God is. Here is who God is: God is love, forgiveness, and compassion such that, knowing we are at that very moment planning betrayal, God becomes our servant and our nourishment. God is that humble, that compassionate, that willing to identify with us and be for us.

Later I realized in prayer how union is possible without a person’s human personality being overwhelmed or, as it were, possessed. As people mature spiritually, they grow more like you. Then when you ask for their surrender, they surrender that in themselves which is the divine self or longing to be the divine self, that which longs to be like you. The whole personality, even the cultural self, is transformed. And because you and God are one, intimacy with you is intimacy with God. There’s no need of a “second step.” Profound simplicity lies behind the complexity and difficulty of spiritual growth, change, and surrender leading to union.

16 December 1996

Dear Teacher and Nourisher,

Early this morning during prayer time I tried to do as you have taught me, to remain mindless and unfocused, yet give myself to you. I heard the phrase from 1 John I’d just read: “God is light; in God there is no darkness at all.” I thought, “Then God is unsullied by evil: I can bring all before God, give my whole self to God without fear.”

Then I knew that you humbly want to dwell in me, want to be my food and drink, so I asked for these things and saw that eucharist is only a symbol, a symbol of this true spiritual eating and drinking of you. I can toss eucharist aside if I wish, for I shall feed on you within myself forever. Then the holy eucharist was celebrated within me. Perhaps this is why I've begun attending Quaker meeting so regularly — every Sunday this month. Eucharist is celebrated inwardly there every Sunday, without need of the outward rite.

The Moloch worshipers had it exactly backwards when they sacrificed their children to Moloch to feed a god. It's the other way around. God is sacrificed for us. God feeds us. God-mother; God-nurturer; God-lover.

Then I spoke in tongues. As usual I didn't know what was said. Again I felt frustrated but accept it — a spiritual gift. It was an ecstatic, person-to-person speaking, very intimate, very tender.

As the tongues ceased, I was shown God's humility: the boy who was hanged in the Nazi camp but strangled at the end of the rope because he was too light for the drop to break his neck — God. Those tortured in South America — God. The raped and humiliated — God. The fearful on death row — God. The dying in intensive care whose welfare is neglected so doctors can claim one prolonged hour of breath — God. God suffers with us. Not a vision of the impassive, unmoved God of the philosophers!

31 July 1998

Dear Buddha-nature,

I'm still baffled. Just after I'd written my May letter to you, I had the most extraordinary prayer session. I spoke in Tongues as I do fairly often, still without knowing what I'm saying (and I'm still frustrated about that!). Then I was in the room with the altar, just as I've often been, but I was there as

Buddha. I don't mean Buddha was there or that I was dressed like Buddha. I mean that I was Buddha.

A voice said. "You have chosen the Buddha-nature: you have chosen contemplation." Although I agree I've chosen contemplation, I felt confused. Buddha?

I replied, "I guess I don't mind, but I don't know anything about Buddhism."

"Not Buddhism, but Buddha," echoed through my mind. That was clear: not a religion developed by people, but a way of being. I was united with the Buddha-nature rather than being a person who practices a particular religion.

But I still wasn't satisfied because I couldn't help but think that my background and understanding of God is Christian. The reply: "Not sacrifice, but prayer." I understood that, too. Christianity emphasizes sacrifice, Buddhism prayer. I've chosen prayer, not sacrifice.

Am I being united to the Buddha-nature rather than to you? Or are you also the Buddha-nature? That makes sense: there's one God who has entered many people, some fully, so that we may speak of incarnations, plural. Each incarnation is a manifestation of God, but God appears differently in each one because God transforms each personality in such a way that the personality remains intact. It isn't replaced by the divine.

The session ended with my wondering whether this means saying goodbye to eucharist because it's exclusively Christian.

## Spiritual Marriage

30 March 1999

Dear Revealer,

One morning I prayed for you to show us how to live, only to see a whole line of prophets and teachers pass by, not only from Jewish tradition but Buddha and Lao-tzu and others

as well, all the way up to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. How foolish I was. You've constantly shown us how to live.

Lao-tzu probably showed up because my devotional reading recently has been the *Tao Te Ching*. Lao-tzu knows the same God I know. Here's my favorite verse so far:

The supreme good is like water,  
Which nourishes all things without trying to.  
It is content with the low places that people disdain.  
Thus it is like the Tao.

The supreme good is like water. In prayer recently I revisited familiar landmarks — the meadow, the altar, the ocean. I no longer fear drowning. I can walk easily now along the bottom of the sea.

Some days later, I complained to you that I'm wasting my talents: I have too many; I just can't use them all. You offered a different perspective: God gives generously, abundantly, far more than we can use. I need to think of my talents as a cornucopia, an overflowing abundance, and be grateful.

Wow. As I write this I wonder whether it also applies to the "evil" of natural selection, which apparently is extremely wasteful. Maybe we should regard the lives of organisms that are generated but don't survive to reproduce as God's creative exuberance pervading nature.

I think most of us are secretly little engineers who love efficiency. We often conceive of God as an engineer too, the Grand Designer. But maybe a better metaphor would be the banqueting God Jesus so often tells us about in the New Testament, the one who greets the Prodigal Son with the fatted calf and welcomes outcasts to feasts. Maybe a better metaphor would be those one or two hundred gallons of wine the Gospel of John has Jesus create after the guests have already drunk everything in sight. Maybe we should think of the "waste" in nature as celebration, not dissipation.

30 August 1999

Dear God of Us All,

Yesterday I decided to join the Quakers.

My decision occurred right after I gave a message. The message was about choosing rightly within one's own religious tradition, that we should choose God and love rather than rules. I sat down and immediately thought that the Quakers represent the best within Christianity — partly because they reach beyond it — and that I should join officially, in support.

Afterwards I ate brunch with one of my beloved Quaker friends and mentioned the possibility to him. He was very supportive, even enthusiastic. He said all I had to do was send a letter to the clerk of the Meeting saying I want to become a Recorded Member and, briefly, mention why. I considered it prayerfully this morning and everything seems clear. Joining seems the right thing to do, so I composed the following letter to send to the clerk:

“I have been an Attender at Friends Meeting for almost three and a half years, and I would now like to become a Recorded Member. For many years, I have thought Quakerism represented the highest moral standards within the Christian tradition. As an Attender I find that I have honored typically Quaker beliefs all my adult life — belief in that of God in everyone, human equality, truth telling, and simplicity.

“Furthermore the Quaker practice of listening to/for God in silence has developed into a willingness among Quakers to listen to others and to respect religious traditions outside Christianity. This willingness to listen seems to me to express appropriate humility before our ignorance of a God who is larger than the human mind and before others who may know more about God than we do. By becoming a Recorded Member, I feel I would be demonstrating my personal, public support for these beliefs and standards.”

Recently I've been wondering whether I'm still a Christian. I know God is incarnate in all of us to some extent and deeply wants to be incarnate completely. I think God may be fully incarnate in many people — Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi, and Louie Crew, to name four. This doesn't mean Jesus isn't unique. We're all unique. Moreover I know incarnation doesn't mean replacement. It means unity, so that every incarnation, even the fullest, fulfills a unique relationship with God. Still I no longer believe Jesus was a sacrifice for sins or uniquely the Son of God, or the last revelation of God. If the charismatics were to ask me whether I'm a Christian, I think I'd be honest to reply something like "No, I don't think so. I try to be a follower of Jesus, and I don't think the two are compatible."

This reminds me that Father Malachi Martin died. He said emptying one's mind as you've taught me to do opens it to evil. Here was a Jesuit and life-long priest running from God as if from the devil, mistaking the two. I fear there's much running from God, especially by clergy. Father Martin's fears are widespread. I heard them expressed in places as distant as a charismatic church and the Spiritual Direction Institute, headed by a Roman Catholic priest. Of course, I have fears myself. Still I want to love God, and I can't love and run away at the same time. I'd end up in little pieces.

30 September 1999

Dear God of Meditation,

I've seen even more clearly that there are only two religions, one with rituals, rules, barriers, and an external savior; the other with the inner Light, the integration of all things, and the oneness of reality. One of my friends has been living according to a modified Benedictine rule. Meditating in the Zendo, I saw that such a life is precisely what Jesus rejected — the Essene rules and self-made holiness. In contrast Jesus lived his life spontaneously in God's presence without need of such

external props. However I have no idea how someone moves from the first sort of religion into the second.

I'm back to the realization that what I see as chains, other people perceive as safety nets. How does a person leave the apparent safety net of rules and parental protection and leap into the unknown dark? But Buddha did it and so did Jesus and George Fox and Kierkegaard and thousands of others. Is there a technique in aid of grace? Or does the leap require trauma like Buddha's confrontation with suffering, Jesus' baptismal voice from heaven, Fox's voice within, or Kierkegaard's wind from the groves of Mamre? I don't even know where to classify my own vision of marriage I saw so many years ago. Even then I didn't have a "rules" religion, and I'd already experienced the mystic dark night of the soul, during which God apparently withdraws, and the mystic lover learns to love God for the sake of love, without thought of reward. My four years of atheism, I now think, constituted my dark night of the soul.

I also know now that there are two ways to become God. The first is to replace God by taking onto oneself all the world's grief and sin and guilt, believing one must save the world oneself. The other is to let God replace one's self, be absorbed in the Light, free one's Buddha nature from the illusion of self, knowing that God has saved the world already. The simple truth all religions teach is that we have only two choices: either we try to become God or we let God become us. Hell or heaven.

31 October 1999

Dear and Blessed Guide,

I have the key! O thank you, I have the key! God bless N. T. Wright, and thank you for sending him here yesterday.

Wright talked about the Christ-as-Roman-Emperor motif in St. Paul's letters. Months ago I'd read Thomas Schmidt's article about Mark's use of the same motif in his passion narrative, gotten excited about Mark's genius, then filed

Schmidt's article away. But now that I've heard Wright, I've resurrected Schmidt and found a new interpretation of Christianity, one that makes sense of everything I know about the historical Jesus combined with the insights from my own experience.

My new interpretation begins with Jesus, a man. During his lifetime this man becomes filled to the fullest with the Spirit of God. After his baptism, if not before, he lives in unity with God. This man is crucified, but his spirit lives on, for it is united to the eternal Spirit of God.

Jesus' followers experience his presence after his death so strongly they think he is still alive. As Jews who already believe in the resurrection of the dead, they interpret his continuing life as the resurrection of the first human being, with the resurrection of all others soon to follow. They think the world they know is about to end — all this is straight out of St. Paul. As Jews who think he's ascended to heaven they also interpret him as the heavenly Messiah of Daniel 7 and, later, as the Davidic Messiah. However the Jesus movement quickly becomes predominately Gentile. When Paul and Mark write to their Gentile converts, they apply pagan concepts to Jesus. They portray Jesus through pagan beliefs about the Roman emperor. By the time of Jesus, pagans believed the Roman emperor is the son of a god on Earth and that he ascends to the realm of the gods when he dies. Pagan converts would construe the Jewish Jesus as the son of Yahweh, of course, rather than the son of a pagan god.

As they increasingly deify Jesus, his followers set him so far above the rest of humanity that eventually Christians can no longer identify with him. He seems too exalted to be a role model. So Christians develop human intermediaries with whom to identify — Mary and the saints — to whom they ultimately begin praying. Protestants are not immune. Dependent solely on scripture, they identify with Luther and Calvin who become the true interpreters of scripture. I think Christians need to

forget about the intermediaries and the myths of Messiah and Son of God and follow Jesus, who was fully human, like us. He shows us how to live, not Mary, Benedict, Dominic, Francis, or Loyola, nor Luther or Calvin, although they may have something to offer, too.

I met with my clearness committee, composed of three of my favorite Quakers, to ascertain whether I'm clear to become a recorded member. The gathering was a pleasure, so that I felt more welcomed than examined. They were evidently delighted I've decided to become a recorded member.

December 31, 1999

Beloved,

Marriage, yes. I've no doubt. O thank you for being so clear. You reviewed the vision of Maundy Thursday 1993 and told me this vision has now been fulfilled. Dearly beloved, thank you. I love you.

I didn't see it coming despite long and intense prayer sessions all week. Monday I felt invited to enter God's inner sanctum, which is darkness and ecstasy, and I had a vision of the cosmos. In the vision, I saw that nothing ever dies; it only changes. Everything from the big bang forward is gathered up in me, in all of us — the light, the carbon, and the other elements. God and the material world are united, are one. In us — in me — they are united willingly. A material being (me) has freely said yes to this unity. In me, and in thousands of others, the material universe has said yes to its oneness with God.

Another morning, another vision: that to enter the inner sanctum, a person must have nothing but love. Instead of love, I felt my fear of my mother, of the female, and I concluded that I had a long road to travel before entering the inner sanctum. I joyously anticipated a rich and interesting journey.

Because Jesus was male, and we customarily don't think of persons as neuter, I usually think of you — indeed, experience you — as male. But during this same prayer time, in a very intimate moment, you switched to female. What a shock! And yes, I have always known intellectually that you are neither male nor female, and yes, the change has occurred before, but not during such an intimate encounter. The replacement at that vulnerable moment highlighted my fear, which is so far from love.

Yesterday in prayer I felt a love for myself I've never felt before. It wasn't self-centered and egocentric, but a real caring-for. It was good.

This morning was two hours of ecstasy and darkness, two hours of fulfillment. You do not reject us; instead you fulfill our nature.

You came to me as you have come so often, and I gave myself to you as I have given myself so often, in great pain, great joy. As sometimes before, your presence spread throughout my whole body. But for the first time, you turned to face the way I was facing, sat where I was sitting, and united yourself to me. Then, with a smile, you became female. It was okay. It was wonderful. I repeated "I give myself to you completely," and you echoed the sentence back. You, the soul of eucharist, the source of love, the inner light.

And that was when I saw the vision of 1993. I knew this moment to be the fulfillment of that invitation, that promise.